

NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK NOMINATION

NPS Form 10-900

USDI/NPS NRHP Registration Form (Rev. 8-86)

OMB No. 1024-0018

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United States Department of the Interior, National Park Service

National Register of Historic Places Registration Form

1. NAME OF PROPERTY

Historic Name: Palmer, Captain Nathaniel B., House

Other Name/Site Number: Palmer-Loper House,
Palmer, Nathaniel and Alexander House

2. LOCATION

Street & Number: 40 Palmer Street

Not for publication:___

City/Town: Stonington

Vicinity:___

State: CT

County: New London

Code: 011

Zip Code: 06378

3. CLASSIFICATION

Ownership of Property

Private: X

Public-Local: ___

Public-State: ___

Public-Federal:___

Category of Property

Building(s): X

District: ___

Site: ___

Structure: ___

Object:___

Number of Resources within Property

Contributing

2

2

Noncontributing

1 buildings

___ sites

___ structures

___ objects

1 Total

Number of Contributing Resources Previously Listed in the National Register: 0

Name of Related Multiple Property Listing: N/A

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4. STATE/FEDERAL AGENCY CERTIFICATION

As the designated authority under the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966, as amended, I hereby certify that this ____ nomination ____ request for determination of eligibility meets the documentation standards for registering properties in the National Register of Historic Places and meets the procedural and professional requirements set forth in 36 CFR Part 60. In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register Criteria.

Signature of Certifying Official_____
Date_____
State or Federal Agency and Bureau

In my opinion, the property ____ meets ____ does not meet the National Register criteria.

Signature of Commenting or Other Official_____
Date_____
State or Federal Agency and Bureau**5. NATIONAL PARK SERVICE CERTIFICATION**

I hereby certify that this property is:

- ____ Entered in the National Register
____ Determined eligible for the National Register
____ Determined not eligible for the National Register
____ Removed from the National Register
____ Other (explain):

Signature of Keeper_____
Date of Action

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6. FUNCTION OR USE

Historic: Domestic Sub: single dwelling

Current: Domestic Sub: single dwelling

7. DESCRIPTION

Architectural Classification: Late Victorian/Italianate

Materials:

Foundation: granite
Walls: weatherboard
Roof: asphalt
Other:

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Describe Present and Historic Physical Appearance.

The Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House is located at the corner of Palmer and North Water streets in Stonington, a town on Connecticut's eastern coast (Photograph #1). It was built between 1852 and 1854 on a point of land, formerly known as Pine Point, at the north end of the low lying headland that shelters the eastern side of Stonington harbor. The village of Stonington to the south occupies the lower portion of this peninsula, which extends almost a mile south to Stonington Point and Fisher's Island Sound. Once almost entirely surrounded by water, the original Palmer holdings extended to Quana Duck Cove to the north and east and Lambert Cove, at the head of the harbor, to the west.

The layout of the remaining four-acre property is unchanged. Still divided and enclosed by original walls and fences, it has an extensive eastern shorefront along Quana Duck Cove. Approximately half of the site is occupied by the Palmer House, its two outbuildings, and the landscaped grounds (see Exhibit A for site plan). On the eastern half of the property is a large open field, left in its natural state and enclosed by a low, granite-block wall. The wall rises to six feet at its northern end, part of the foundation of a former carriage house associated with the property (no longer extant). Beyond the field to the east is a stand of trees and the property runs to the marshy cove shore. Along its west side, nearest the house, the field is bordered by a stand of mature trees. A former roadway between the house and this wall, now partially grassed over, opens up a waterview to the north. The North Water Street side of the house site is also bordered by a granite block wall, and along the south, or Palmer Street side, in front of the house, there is an original cast-iron fence. At either end open gateways, flanked by carved granite pillars, allow access from Palmer Street to a semi-circular driveway. Although this fence had been repaired and restored to its original condition, a similar fence on the east side, deteriorated beyond repair, was removed. At the rear of the house are two outbuildings. The one nearer the house is clapboarded and has a partial granite block foundation on the east side (Photograph #2). A contributing building, it incorporates a former icehouse, a workshop, and a privy. The two-room privy, which has plastered walls, is located at the north end. The second outbuilding, a long storage shed set at a 90 degree angle to the first building, is non-contributing since it was severely damaged and almost completely rebuilt after the hurricane of 1938. These buildings form a rear courtyard with a kitchen garden, which is enclosed by a wooden fence along its west side. The fence is a recent replacement but the granite posts with their iron hangers are original.

The Palmer House was designed in a variation of the Italianate style, often called Greco-Italianate (Photograph #s 3, 4, 5). It has a three-story main block, almost square in plan (40' x 42'), with a shallow-pitched, hipped and gabled roof, a full cellar, and a foundation of cut granite. At the center of the roof is an octagonal cupola with an interior widow's walk that commands a 360-degree view from its eight windows. An original gable-roofed rear addition is composed of two sections: a kitchen ell, two stories in height with a rear interior chimney, joined to a smaller one-story summer kitchen at its rear. There is a small open porch on the east side next to the house, which provides access to the kitchen ell, and another entrance at the rear of the summer kitchen.

All of the elevations of the main block have the same symmetrically balanced design, but which is more architecturally elaborated on the south or front facade. The eaves of each elevation are interrupted by a broad central wall pediment, capped by a shallow gabled roof.

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The ridge of each gable extends back to the center cupola. A boxed overhang with a molded cornice extends along the eaves and the rakes of the pediments on all four sides, supported by a continuous row of scrolled wooden brackets, interspersed with smaller consoles. Similar but smaller brackets highlight the cornice of the cupola. A tripartite window, composed of a central round-arched sash with wooden tracery, flanked by two smaller round-arched, double-hung sash, is located under the front facade pediment. A smaller version of just the central window is repeated under the pediments on the other elevations.

Broad stone steps lead up to the elevated portico at the center of the front façade (Photograph #6). Its flat roof is supported by paired, fluted and tapered columns in a modified Corinthian order. The capitals display acanthus leaf carvings. Its full entablature with a projecting cornice is supported by paired consoles and large dentils and capped by a scalloped trim board. The portico shelters a double-leaf door flanked by doubled, paneled pilasters. Those next to the door are narrower and capped by consoles. The upper two-thirds of the paneled doors contain narrow, hinged glazed frames that open inward and are protected by decorative metal screens on the outside.

There are similar screens over the lower lights of the tall paired windows on either side of the portico, which each contain four-over-six sash. These windows, like the rest of the front facade fenestration, have projecting molded cornices with wooden consoles. The four-over-four, double-hung windows on the upper floors have smaller consoles under either end of their sills. The window cornices of the secondary elevations of the main block and the ell are less prominent and narrower; cornice consoles there are omitted but are found under the sills.

After suffering from almost ten years of the neglect, the house was restored to its original appearance in 1989. Deteriorated clapboarding and roofing were replaced during the restoration and three of the four interior brick end chimneys were rebuilt above the roof. The fourth was capped at the roofline. Exterior detailing and windows were repaired by carefully matching materials and profiles. With the exception of the installation of modern plumbing and a new kitchen, the interior of the house has changed very little since it was completed in 1854. Little restoration was needed here since all the original plaster and woodwork remained in place. Much of the cosmetic work--refinishing, painting, or papering--was carried out when most of the 14 rooms were decorated for a "showcase" exhibit by a number of area designers, not necessarily to period.

The main block is organized around a central hallway with four rooms on each floor (see Exhibit B for schematic floor plans). The main staircase, which has a continuous balustrade and turned balusters, runs from the first to the third floor in an open plastered stairwell and continues up into the cupola (Photograph #s 7, 8). At the head of the first-floor stairs, at the so-called "coffin corner," is a marble round-arched niche. Foliated plasterwork details the fascia boards at the second and third floors, as well as the outside ends of all the risers. A rear servants' staircase, located just inside the kitchen ell, extends in a spiral from the first to the second floor (Photograph #9). A broad wooden shelf near the top of the staircase is original and caps the curved plastered wall of the stairway below. The closed balustrade is sheathed with vertical bead-and-bevel boards and capped with a broad, flat bannister. The modern handrail on the outside wall was an addition required by code.

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While both floors of the main block have similar plans and comparable detailing and finishes, the public spaces on the first level are more elaborate (Photograph #s 10, 11, 12, 13).

Throughout, walls and ceilings are plastered, doors and windows have wide molded casings and shouldered lintels, and there are panels beneath all the windows. Although not all are in place at the present time, all the windows of the main block have interior louvered shutters, which fold back against the panelled jambs. All of the larger rooms on both the first and second floors in this section contain a fireplace on the outside wall, fitted out with a coal-burning grate. Each of the surrounds on the first floor is carved from a different color or type of imported marble and designed around an arched opening. Those on the second floor have the same simple rectangular design, executed in light grey marble. The high ceilings (12 feet at the first floor) are set off by heavy crown moldings, which in the main parlor and the dining room have a frieze band of open foliated plasterwork. Large double pocket doors separate these rooms (Photograph #11). Plaster medallions are found in the center of each ceiling. An unusual feature of the first floor is the captain's study between the rooms on the west side (room A on plan). It contains a floor-to-ceiling, built-in cabinet with a desk and chart shelves concealed behind mahogany-veneered, panelled doors. A similar built-in for the room directly above (in storage and not now in place) probably served as a clothes cupboard. Another small special-purpose space on the second floor at the front center was known as the "parrot room," for this is where the captain's bird was kept in its cage between voyages (room B on plan).

There are no fireplaces on the third floor, but all the rooms there are finished, except for those used for storage under the eaves. One room is not restored and shows the condition of these rooms before the restoration (Photograph #14). Except for the cistern room, which once contained a large water tank, the space here and above the kitchen was used for servants' quarters. From the open hallway, a spiral stair provides access to the widow's walk in the cupola (Photograph #15). The walls of the stairwell below the windows are sheathed with vertical boards. Wear at the inside of the stair treads and on the platform above testify to use over time. The balustrade around the platform follows the hexagonal shape of the room and there is a small medallion in the ceiling (Photograph #16).

As expected, detailing of the rooms in the ell is simpler, but here too are found interior shutters and molded casings. The new island kitchen leaves the outside walls intact. The original cast-iron stove remains in place in the main kitchen and is back-to-back with a wood-burning fireplace in the summer kitchen to the rear.

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8. STATEMENT OF SIGNIFICANCE

Certifying official has considered the significance of this property in relation to other properties:

Nationally: X Statewide: Locally:

Applicable National

Register Criteria:

A X B X C X D

Criteria Considerations

(Exceptions):

A B C D E F G

NHL Criteria:

1, 2, and 4

NHL Theme(s) [1987]:

V. Political and Military Affairs, 1783-1860

F. Post-War Nationalism, 1816-1828

XII. Business

A. Extractive or Mining Industries

5. Fishing and Livestock

XVIII. Technology (Engineering and Invention)

B. Transportation

XVI. Architecture

C. Greek Revival

NHL Theme(s) [1994]:

VIII. Changing Role of the United States in the World Community

3. Expansionism and Imperialism

V. Developing the American Economy

1. Extraction and Production

3. Transportation and Communication

6. Exchange and Trade

III. Expressing Cultural Values

5. Architecture, Landscape Architecture,
and Urban Design

Areas of Significance:

Maritime History
Exploration and Settlement
Commerce
Architecture

Period(s) of Significance:

1852-1877

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Significant Dates: 1852

Significant Person(s): Palmer, Captain Nathaniel Brown (1799-1877)

Cultural Affiliation: N/A

Architect/Builder: Collins & Son (shipbuilders), New York City

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State Significance of Property, and Justify Criteria, Criteria Considerations, and Areas and Periods of Significance Noted Above.

The Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House achieves national significance as the home of the Yankee mariner who discovered Antarctica in 1820, the last world frontier. This historically significant event brought to an end the great age of global exploration that had begun in the fifteenth century and will remain an unique achievement in American history. The peninsula which Palmer found and mapped on Antarctica has born his name on world maps and cartographic charts since that time. In 1970 the Battle of Stonington flag was raised at the South Pole by the U. S. Navy to commemorate the 150th anniversary of this event.¹ Also in recognition of this achievement, the U. S. Post Office issued a stamp in 1990 bearing his likeness and a drawing of the sloop *Hero* in which he made this epic voyage of discovery. Exceptionally well-preserved and architecturally distinguished, the Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House is an outstanding Connecticut example of mid-nineteenth-century domestic architecture.

Historical Significance

As the scion of two generations of shipbuilders in Stonington, Nathaniel B. Palmer (1799-1877) seemed destined for a maritime career. He first went to sea at age 14, shipping aboard a blockade runner during the War of 1812 as an ordinary seaman. By the time he was 18, Palmer had taken command of his own ship, the schooner *Galena*, and was engaged in the coastal trade. It was the opportunity to join the lucrative sealing trade in 1819 that eventually led to his discovery of Antarctica, an exceptionally promising start to a brilliant career. Ranked as one of the foremost of New England's mariners for his substantial role in the development of clipper ships, Palmer later served as a clipper captain in the China trade on ships of his own design.² Both he and his brother were noted yachtsmen and charter members of the New York Yacht Club, founded in 1844. (His brother, Alexander, was a founder of the America's Cup Race.)

Stonington mariners had engaged in sealing since the 1790s. By the time Palmer entered the business, Stonington had become Connecticut's leading sealing port. Fortunes had already been made from this immensely profitable trade here and in other New England ports. Literally millions of furbearing seals had been taken annually by both American and foreign sealing crews in southern waters. As a result, the traditional sealing locations on the coast of South America and the Falkland Islands off the southern coast of Argentina were totally depleted. Sealing had become highly competitive as this valuable resource dwindled. Sealskins were selling at record-high levels (about two dollars each); one voyage could return an eight-fold profit, as much as \$20,000 for each vessel. American sealers were constantly searching for new rookeries farther south; continual exploration was vital to their success. Although motivated solely by private commercial gain rather than exploration for its own

¹ The flag was a replica of the one flown during the bombardment of Stonington by the British during the War of 1812.

² Robert Albion *et al*, *New England and The Sea* (Middletown, Connecticut, Wesleyan University Press, 1972), p. 112.

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sake, both American and British ships hunting for seals and whales discovered many new island groups between South America and Antarctica in this period.

When Palmer signed on in 1819 as second mate on board the brig *Hersila* under the command of Captain James Sheffield, he was fully aware of the hazards and challenges, as well as the profits to be made.³ Not only was it his first deep-water voyage, but it was also one in which he would explore uncharted polar waters in search of new sealing grounds in the mythical Auroras. This island chain had been identified by a Dutch navigator centuries earlier, but its location was still unknown. The trip was sponsored by Captain Edmund Fanning of Stonington, retired from the sea but a major promoter and investor in the trade.⁴ First landfall for the *Hersila* was the Falklands. Cattle and hogs released by earlier expeditions to these once seal-rich islands had multiplied and the islands had become the customary provisioning stop for sealing vessels. The fact that another sealing ship, the *Espirito Santo*, chartered by Englishmen in the Argentine, also provisioned at the Falklands proved to be providential. Palmer plotted the course of the British ship when it left the Falklands and three days later successfully tracked it to its secret destination in what are now known as the South Shetlands. Seals were so plentiful there that both ships took on a full cargo of skins and the *Hersila* returned in triumph to Stonington. Although it has been speculated that Palmer may have sighted the more distant land mass of Antarctica during this voyage, that has never been confirmed.

In 1820, hoping to further capitalize on the profits of the first voyage, Fanning put together a large sealing fleet for a return voyage to the South Shetlands. It was during this second expedition that Palmer made his epic discovery. Only 21 at the time, he was given command of a small sloop, prophetically named the *Hero*, which was to serve as tender for the other seven vessels in the fleet (five brigs and two schooners).⁵ As its captain he also was expected to scout ahead of the fleet to keep it out of "harm's way," a formidable task in these uncharted waters, which were ice-laden, often foggy, and notorious for the strength of their winds. The *Hero* carried a crew of only five (including the captain). Only two members of the crew were older than the skipper, Peter Harvey, a 31-year-old African American, and the first mate, 28-year-old Phineas Wilcox. Palmer's second mate was his friend, Richard Fanning Loper, also 21, who later made a name for himself as a famous

³ Although other sources in the bibliography were consulted, the chief source for the summary of Palmer's exploits here was the definitive and most recent scientific paper. See Lawrence Martin, "Antarctica Discovered by a Connecticut Yankee, Captain Nathaniel Brown Palmer," *The Geographical Review*, Vol. XXX, No. 4 (October 1940), pp. 529-552.

⁴ Fanning participated in or promoted at least 80 sealing expeditions, starting with his first in 1797 which yielded a cargo of sealskins valued at \$100,000. Although the sealskins could be brought back to Stonington or other Connecticut ports, more often they were traded for other merchandise in New York. Later the mainstay of the China trade, sealskins were a major trading commodity for Chinese goods such as tea and silk.

⁵ Built in Groton, Connecticut, in 1800, the *Hero* was slightly over 47 feet in length with one mast and one deck. It had a beam of only 16 feet ten inches and a draft of 6 feet 9 inches. Freeboard on an even keel has been estimated at only one foot. When the ship was scrapped, Nathaniel Palmer kept the rudder and installed it as a workbench in the toolhouse on the property.

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inventor and shipbuilder.⁶ The youngest member was a 16-year-old seaman, Stanton Burdick, from Rhode Island.

In company with the other ships, the *Hero* set sail on July 31, 1820, for what became the first recorded American voyage below the Antarctic Circle (approximately 66 degrees south latitude). Travelling in two squadrons, the fleet expected to arrive in southern polar waters by November, the start of summer in that hemisphere. Although it is only 7000 miles as the crow flies from Stonington Harbor, the route taken by sailing ships of the day was much longer. Because of ocean currents and prevailing winds, two crossings of the Atlantic were required before sail could be set for a southerly course along the coast of South America. When the fleet finally rendezvoused at the Shetlands, it found the seal rookeries of the previous year had been decimated and Palmer was sent out to explore for new locations. It was on this part of the voyage that he made landfall at Antarctica, having sailed 10,000 nautical miles from Stonington in 100 days. This remarkable feat of seamanship and navigation was accomplished in a vessel half the size of the *Nina*, the smallest of the ships commanded by Christopher Columbus on his epic voyage to discover America.

Considering the momentous nature of the event, his notation in the *Hero's* log on November 17, 1820, of the first sighting of Antarctica, is a masterpiece of understatement and brief enough to be repeated here in full:⁷

Got underweigh at 10 we were clear of the harbor [Port Williams, Deception Island, South Shetlands] stood over for the Land [Antarctica] Course S by E 1/2 E Ends with fresh Breeses from SW and Pleasant.

The following day, November 18, 1820, he recorded:

....at 8 P M got over under the Land, found the sea filled with immense Icebergs at 12 [midnight] Hove To under the Jib Laid off & on until morning....at 4 AM made sail for shore and Discovered--a strait--it was literally filled with Ice and the shore inaccessible thought it not prudent to Venture in Ice Bore away to the Northerd....the shore everywhere Perpendicular....the Latitude at the mouth of the strait was 63-45 S.

By January, Palmer was back in the area, still seeking seals, but by this time it was clear that he had become more fully aware of the momentous nature of his discovery. As he wrote in later life, it was an opportunity to explore the coastline of Antarctica and satisfy himself that the land he found was indeed a continent. During this return voyage, he penetrated below the Antarctic circle to 68 degrees south and explored and charted more than 200 miles of the west coast of the headland that he had found in November. Extending northwest towards South America for almost 800 miles, and now known as the Palmer Peninsula, it is capped by an extensive flat-topped mountain range which rises above the

⁶ Loper is credited with invention of the first screw propeller for steamships and the first production of ribbed steel-hulled ships at his yards in Stonington and Philadelphia. He was cited by President Abraham Lincoln for ships built for the government during the Mexican and Civil wars.

⁷ The logbook and other related manuscripts are in the Library of Congress. They were donated in 1927 by members of the third generation to own and occupy this house, Andrew Palmer Loper and his sisters, Elizabeth Palmer Loper and Priscilla Dixon Loper.

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icesheet there. Mount Wilcox, a prominent peak, was named by Palmer to honor his first mate. Islands which he found off the west coast of the peninsula are now called the Palmer Archipelago and the United States maintains a permanent naval facility in a harbor there called Palmer Station.

Although letters home had already been published in Connecticut newspapers, a chance encounter with Russian explorers during this period made Palmer's discovery known to the world. The Russian Czar, Alexander I (*Alexsandr Pavlovich*; 1777-1825), had sent two warships under the command of Captain (later Admiral) Fabian von Gottlieb Bellinghaussen on a voyage to these waters to prove or disprove the existence of Antarctica. Their meeting off the coast of Freisland, South Shetlands, in February of 1821, several months after the *Hero* had made landfall at Antarctica, is recorded in the Russian ship's log. Bellinghaussen, who found it hard to believe that such a small vessel had sailed from America, upon being informed of Palmer's discovery, examined his charts and made a tissue paper tracing. It was Bellinghaussen who is credited with naming the peninsula "Palmer (or Palmer's) Land," an identification which appeared in a published atlas in America as early as September of that year.⁸

Ever since the Ancient Greeks imagined a land mass at the South Pole to balance their maps of the known world, the concept of Antarctica had tantalized geographers and explorers. However, throughout much of recorded history, the continent had remained an enigma. Its actual existence was debated and its true size was unknown for centuries. By the sixteenth century, it was customarily located on world maps as an extension of the African and South American continents, even though such a connection had begun to be refuted by exploration at the end of the fifteenth century. It was Vasco da Gama (1469-1498) who proved that Antarctica was not joined to the African continent when he rounded the Cape of Good Hope in 1497. Successive voyages by a number of other explorers also made it clear that Antarctica was a separate entity and began to reveal its true size. Among them was Ferdinand Magellan (c.1480-1521) whose trans-Pacific voyage for Spain in 1510 located the passage known as the Straits of Magellan at the tip of South America. Australia's possible connection to the land mass was eliminated by Dutch explorer Abel Janzoon Tasman (c. 1602-1650) a century later. It was not until the late eighteenth century, however, that a real effort was made to establish its size. The English explorer John Cook (1728-1779) circumnavigated the continent in the 1770s but apparently never came close enough to establish that there was a land mass under the ice sheet; his reports discouraged further exploration for many years.

By the time of Palmer's discovery, however, there was renewed interest in Antarctica. In addition to extensive commercial activity and the exploration by Russia, as discussed above, other nations sponsored voyages of exploration. Among them were several English ships that were exploring in polar waters in the 1820s, giving rise to conflicting and complicated claims to discovering the continent. The resolution of these claims, some involving forgery of

⁸ William Woodbridge, *Woodbridge's School Atlas* (Hartford, September 1821). The original maps traced by Bellinghaussen are in the Fanning Papers in the collection of the American Geographical Society. Lawrence Martin thought the Russian tracing was in Leningrad in 1940, but it is not known if they survived World War II. Martin, *Antarctica Discovered*, p. 551.

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charts, has occupied naval historians and geographers for more than a century. English claims to the discovery were repudiated by a century-long investigation by the British admiralty based on cartographic evidence. The American claim was fully substantiated, however, when all known primary source material was analyzed by Lawrence Martin of the Library of Congress. His conclusions were summarized in an article in the *Geographical Review* and presented at an international symposium. In this century, although there have been aerial surveys and several trips to the South Pole, very little is yet known about the continent 150 years after Palmer. Much of its five million square miles is buried under three miles of ice and scientists have only begun to unlock its secrets.

The global importance of Antarctica was officially recognized in the International Geophysical Year of 1957-1958, an 18-month period set aside for exploration and sharing of information among scientists from all over the world. Since then, although seven countries, including the United States, have laid claim to territory on the continent, international recognition of its vital role in global ecology has been formalized. In the Antarctic Treaty of 1961, 12 nations agreed to ban all military activity, nuclear testing, and dumping of radioactive waste. It was later expanded to include protection of all plant and animal life and signed by 13 more countries. While there are no enforcement provisions, this document was the first formal recognition that national interests in Antarctica are superseded by global concerns. The discovery of offshore oil in the late 1970s, along with plans to exploit the continent's vast mineral resources, rallied environmentalists when the treaty came up for renewal in 1991. At that time, the most far-reaching environmental regulations were established, with a 50-year ban on all mining and drilling.

Even though Palmer's achievement as an explorer stands alone, his later pivotal role in the clipper trade added considerable luster and significance to his life. After several more voyages to Antarctic waters and the South Seas, Palmer married Elizabeth Babcock in 1826 and settled in Stonington. However, his maritime career was far from over and Palmer went on to establish an international reputation in ship design.⁹ An intuitive and innovative designer, he worked exclusively from his own half-hull models rather than drafted plans and became quite wealthy in the process, holding shares in every vessel he designed. By the late 1830s, he was designing and building fast packet ships for the Atlantic trade, which were constructed by Edward Knight Collins, of Collins & Son, the firm that later erected the Stonington house. His fast packets, called the Dramatic Line, were based on the flat-bottomed cotton ships he had sailed between New Orleans and New York earlier in the decade. Palmer served as captain on the maiden voyage between New York and Liverpool on all but one of these packets, a policy that he followed when he began designing the larger China clippers for A. A. Low & Bros. of New York in the 1840s.

The opening of treaty ports in China in 1842 after the Opium Wars, and the later California gold rush, fostered development of clipper ships. Faster ships meant more profits; shipyards from Maine to Virginia joined the competition to build the faster sailing ship afloat, and clippers became the backbone of the merchant trade until the Civil War. A. A. Low &

⁹ Palmer's role as a clipper designer is mentioned in several maritime histories. The discussion here is based on the more detailed analysis in A. B. C. Whipple, *The Clipper Ships* (Alexandria, Virginia: Time-Life Books, 1980), *passim*.

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Bros. was one of the first great merchant houses in New York to sponsor a clipper run to China. Like many New York shipping firms, it was founded by New England mariners. The Lows, Charles and William, came from Salem, Massachusetts, and with the Griswolds of Old Lyme, Connecticut, were leaders in the China trade. In 1843, while returning on his first China run on the *John Paul Jones*, a slower conventional ship, Palmer worked on carving a model of a new faster ship, one that launched the clipper age. William Low, then a passenger on board, was persuaded to invest in the new design, essentially a longer, lofty-sparred version of Palmer's earlier packets. His prototype clipper, the *Houqua*, built at the Brown & Bell shipyard in New York, was placed in service in 1844, some months before the more celebrated *Rainbow*.¹⁰ At the time the *Rainbow*, designed by John W. Griffiths, and considered by some marine historians to have been the precursor, was still unfinished in the stocks at the Smith & Dimon yards in New York.¹¹ With Captain Nat on the quarterdeck on its maiden voyage, the *Houqua* set a record sailing time from New York to Canton of 95 days, one seldom equalled later and rarely surpassed by its rivals. Among the many other Palmer-designed clippers built for Low Bros. was the *N. B. Palmer*, named in recognition of Palmer's achievements and long service to the company.

By the mid-1850s, the golden age of sail that engaged Captain Palmer for most of his life was coming to a close. Although he would make several more sea voyages and had a lifelong interest in yachting, Captain Palmer essentially retired to his new house in Stonington. Built on land that had been in the Palmer family for generations, some say on the foundation of another house which bummed in 1850, the house was constructed for Palmer and his younger brother, Captain Alexander Smith Palmer (1806-1894). The sons of Nathaniel III (1768-1819) and Mercy Brown, both men were associated with the historic voyage in 1820 to the Antarctic. Although Captain Nat, as he was often called, played the leading role, Alexander Palmer was the skipper of another vessel in the fleet. Through their descendants a third man on that fateful voyage was associated with the nominated property. He was Richard Fanning Loper, the boyhood friend who served with Palmer aboard the *Hero*. The lifelong friendship between the two men was cemented by the marriage between Loper's son, Richard Fanning, Jr., and Elizabeth Dixon Palmer, Nathaniel's niece. The daughter of Alexander Palmer, Elizabeth (1848-1929), was born in this house and inherited the property after her father's death in 1894. It remained in the extended Palmer-Loper family until 1977.

¹⁰ The *Houqua* was named for a wealthy and powerful Cantonese Hong (merchant) who had died the previous year. All China traders knew Houqua, who was respected for his generosity and fair dealing. He had helped Samuel Russell of Middletown, Connecticut, set up Russell & Company in 1818, the first foreign trading station in China. One of the Low brothers made a fortune from Russell commissions; another was a clipper captain. The *Houqua* remained in service until it was lost at sea in 1864, having survived damage from several monsoons and even a meteor strike.

¹¹ Griffiths was trained as a shipwright and had no sea experience. Unlike Palmer, he favored a scientific approach to design and his ships were always built from detailed plans based on mathematical formulas. He was probably the first to employ a water tank to test his theories of hull design. It is notable that the *Houqua* and the *Rainbow*, arrived at by such different methods, were quite similar in appearance and only differed because of the flat-bottom or flat-floor approach favored by Palmer, a concept that eventually had almost universal acceptance.

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After the death of his wife, with no children of his own, Palmer took a great interest in his brother's children, especially his namesake, Nathaniel Brown Palmer II. The younger Nathaniel, who suffered from tuberculosis, died at sea while returning from a trip to China for his health with his uncle. It is said that Captain Nat never recovered from this loss and took to his bed after arriving in San Francisco. He died there one month later, in June 1877.

Architectural Evaluation

The Captain Nathaniel Palmer House is one of the finest houses built in this nineteenth-century maritime port. With its fully expressed transitional style, one which marked the end of the Greek Revival period and anticipated the Victorian Italianate common after the Civil War, the Palmer House is clearly comparable to contemporary examples in other port towns in Connecticut. Solidly constructed by a firm of shipbuilders, Collins & Sons of New York, it displays superior craftsmanship and an exceptional level and consistency of architectural detail. Some of its features, such as the detailing and design of the rear staircase, can be directly attributed to the influence of ships' carpenters or joiners. Of particular note is the unusual cupola with a widows' walk that crowns the roof. Proclaiming the seafaring tradition of the house by its design and function, it still commands a view of the harbor and sound. It is especially appropriate that the restoration of this fine house, in 1989, was carried out by Gil Bliss, a restoration specialist who was trained as a shipbuilder at Mystic Seaport. The Palmer House derives further significance from the level of integrity of its setting. Although somewhat reduced in size, the grounds, whether formally landscaped or left in a natural state as they were in the 1850s, still extend to the waterfront and, together with the house and outbuildings, clearly evoke an earlier time and recall the presence of the nationally distinguished nineteenth-century owner.

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9. MAJOR BIBLIOGRAPHICAL REFERENCES

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Previous documentation on file (NPS):

- ☐ Preliminary Determination of Individual Listing (36 CFR 67) has been requested.
- ☐ Previously Listed in the National Register.
- ☐ Previously Determined Eligible by the National Register.
- ☐ Designated a National Historic Landmark.
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Buildings Survey: #
- ☐ Recorded by Historic American Engineering Record: #

Primary Location of Additional Data:

- ☐ State Historic Preservation Office
- ☐ Other State Agency
- ☐ Federal Agency
- ☐ Local Government
- ☐ University
- ☒ Other (Specify Repository):

Library of Congress
American Geographical Society of New York

10. GEOGRAPHICAL DATA

Acreage of Property: 4.4 acres

UTM References: **Zone Easting Northing**

A 19 256700 4580700

Verbal Boundary Description:

The boundaries of the nominated property are described in the Stonington Land Records, Volume 303, page 100, being the same property identified on Stonington Tax Assessor's Map 100, as Block 3, Lot 2.

Boundary Justification:

The boundaries of the nominated property encompass all the remaining property and extant buildings that were associated with the Captain Nathaniel B. Palmer House during its period of significance and which retain their historic integrity.

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11. FORM PREPARED BY

Name/Title: Jan Cunningham, National Register Consultant
Cunningham Associates Ltd.
37 Orange Rd
Middletown, CT 06547
Telephone: (203) 347-4072
Date: October 30, 1994

DESIGNATED A NATIONAL HISTORIC LANDMARK
June 19, 1996